

[Frank Sowersby Gray]

26021

April 28, 1939.

Frank S. Gray (75)

(Retried Hardware

Executive,

34 West 4th-st.,

Jacksonville,

Florida.

Rose [Shepherd?], Writer

FRANK SOWERSBY GRAY

Mr. Gray was interviewed at his home, 34 [West?] Fourth Street. The house of the southern Colonial style of Architecture, built in 1890, its massive fluted white pillars ascending to [the?] roof in front, the wide entrance door, the deep porches, the large building itself centering the hundred foot frontage on Fourth Street, identified it as a mansion fifty years ago.

Mr. Gray [hi self?] answered the door, and I was ushered thru the front hall to his private library on the east, the door of which giving entrance from a side porch stood open.

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"[Now, here's?] three chairs, you can take the one you like, but I am going to [park here?]," he said, seating himself in a well worn arm chair, the upholstering considerably worn, the library table with its metal reading lamp to the left, and the bookcase containing his chosen volumes within easy reach of his right hand. I sat opposite in an old fashioned "platform rocker,["] which was probably among the original furnishings of the house.

"Want to look over my books? I've got some good ones - in fact, I never buy a book [unless?] it's good. Classics - "The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire[,"] Jefferson Davis' History of the Confederacy, Lindborgh's "We." Here's [Frederick?] Davis's "History of Jacksonville." Do you like that? It's not worth a hoot! Everything in it copied from some other book - not [ev?] 2 the wording changed. If you refer to the original book from which the reference is taken, you'll find it is just the same. I gave him lots of information when he was getting up the material for his history, but I sure don't see any of it in here.

"So you want the story of my life? Well, I've always tried to keep out of print, and I do not understand how anything about me personally could possibly interest anybody. I was born at Marcus Hook, Delaware County, Pennsylvania, May 31, 1863. My father was [Ezra?] Gray and my mother was Ann Elizabeth (Sowersby) Gray. My people were of English descent. My great-grandfather started Gray's Ferry just north of his property on the river from Wilmington to Chester, Pennsylvania.

"My father, [Ezra?] Gray, was employed by the Baldwin Locomotive works, and came to Fernandina in 1870 with a load of locomotives — the old wood-burning type - for the Florida Railway and Navigation Company, of which David [Tulee?] was President. The road ran from Jacksonville to Cedar Keys on the Gulf of Mexico. They were not new locomotives, and the load which was shipped by schooner - we did not have steamboats or freight steamers in those days - landing finally at Fernandina where the repair shops for the road were established, and the machinery "reconditioned," as we say now.

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"Mother and I came along on the trip, but the job lengthened out, and since my father considered it would take over a year to put those locomotives in good shape, mother and I returned to Pennsylvania after [a?] few months, leaving father here. His assistant was a man named [Mosely?].

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"As the road grew in importance and prosperity, the work and force at the shops increased and my father was made superintendent, or master mechanic.

"Here is a picture of the old [Yulee]? Railroad Shops - the road was more often referred to as ([Yulee'?]) than by its rightful title. It was taken in 1872. The cross indicates my father, and he is surrounded by his helpers.

No! I won't let you have that picture, or any others, and I've got lots of them — it's too hard to get them back, once they leave your possession.

"The Florida Times-Union issued a special historical edition July 21, 1936, and I let them have some of my pictures to illustrate some Bay Street history on the promise they would be returned. I waited three weeks and no signs of them, then I went down to the office, and they could not find any trace of the pictures. I went again in a few days, becoming insistent that the proper ones locate my pictures, which were finally dug up from somewhere in the plant, but I thought I would have to kill somebody before I got them back. No, sir! Never again! If anyone wants to see these pictures, I'll be glad to show them, or they can copy them here, but take them away?— not on you life!

"Well, to get back to my story. My mother's health was not very good when we lived in the north, so we came back to Fernandina in the early part of 1872, the next year the [shops?] of the Florida Railway and Navigation Company were moved to Jacksonville, and we came here, locating in [Lavilla?].

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"While in Fernandina we became friends with the old families there - Fairbanks, Kings, [Thackoras?], Kellys. Where the Episcopal Church in Fernandina is located, there was in the early days a mound - looked like all Indian mound. I dug down into it and got out a lot of Indian [relics?], beads, [wampum?], and [earthenware?] dishes and pots.

"Mr. [Thackera?] was my Sundayschool teacher. Then there was John Lee Williams, a surveyor, who went all over Florida surveying [property?], and old land grants, and wrote about them - most interesting history. His son, Arthur T. Williams, was my boyhood chum and friend - a [grand?] man.

"Mr. George R. Fairbanks was a very fine gentleman. Here in his 'History of Florida,' and under this photograph here he has autographed this story for me - that is his very own hand-writing - a lovely, lovely man.

"All these families were old Confederate people - rather hidebound. If a newcomer came to Fernandina, there was great quizzing around to get his pedigree, and ascertain what ['ddesigns'?] he might have on the town. If he wished to buy property, the price on the plot desired was immediately raised sky-high, and the discouraged would-[be?] purchaser went elsewhere. This spirit was a detriment to the city's progress, and is the reason the development dropped behind. We came to Jacksonville, a progressive and forward-moving community, and lots of others did the same. If among the early settlers, the former residents of Fernandina and their descendants sent back to [Nassan?] County, there would not be anybody /left in Jacksonville.

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"My mother was a very religious woman, and when I was a small boy, it was decided I would study for the church. However, our coming to Florida, which happened in the period of Reconstruction after the war between the States when there was small chance of higher education, broke that all up.

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"LaVilla was separate from Jacksonville city government. We had our own set-up of city officials.

"Here," he said, going to an office safe in the corner of the room from which he extracted a number of papers and records," is a copy of the LaVilla Advertiser - just one sheet - dated February 1, 1873.

"Now, here is a relic - the first paper published in the city of Philadelphia - the Philadelphia Public Ledger - Vol. I, Number I - dated March 25, 1836.

"In this envelope is a copy of the Jacksonville Press - forerunner of the present Florida Times-Union - dated March 6, 1877. See the newsdealer's stamp in purple ink up there in the right hand corner - Telfair Stockton? His descendants are now among our most distinguished citizens.

"This one - this is precious - the [Ulster?] County [Gazette?] of January 4, 1800, the pages enclosed in stripes of wide black, mourning the death of George Washington.

"And in this little box with the paper is some Continental money, with which Washington paid off his troops during the winter [encampment?] at Valley Forge - this small paper of half-dollar value, this one two dollars, and this, three.

"Here is a pencil sketch of Carpenter's Hall I made as [,?] youngster in 1875, as I sat in the park nearby.

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"I liked to draw when I was a child, and wherever I went I took paper and pencil and if a thing struck me as interesting I just sat down and drew my idea of it.

"Here is a sketch of the ruins of ['dungeness'?] - the old Carnegie home on Amelia Island, off Fernandina.

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"This is my version of the airplane - a mode of future travel - I drew from imagination in 1872. See the wheels to run on tracks, the floats for water travel, and the bird-like wings for lifting it in the air? See the two men up in front - the pilot and his assistant - and the propellers in the rear? In shape, size and design, not much different from modern craft, is it? And here is a crayon sketch of my father, said to be very life-like. "Birds - blackbirds on the wing, redbirds in color, the bluejay and the mockingbird - all sketched from life. A dog, my beloved companion in boyhood days, a horse [jumping?] a rail fence, an old store on the waterfront of Jacksonville, a farm house on the [Len?] Turner Road.

"Here is a deed signed by Oscar Hart, son of I. D. Hart, the founder of Jacksonville, dated July 16, 1873, as "Clerk of Circuit Court, Clerk of Board of County Commissioners of Duval County." It covers a plot of land known as the Sibbald Grant of Spanish days. It was originally five miles square and contained seven thousand acres. The abstract dates back to 1802.

"I still own a great part of this property on [Len?] Turner Road, which I myself laid off years ago, and for thirty-five years have had a large farm there on Moncrief Creek near [Dinsmore?].

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"As a little tyke I went to school to a Miss Shepherd, who had a private school at Jackson and Commercial Streets, the latter now Riverside Avenue. She was a very fine teacher. I later went to the Jacksonville public schools, being one of the early graduates of Duval High.

"After delivering papers for the Florida Times-Union and working for a while helping my father in the shops of the Florida Railway and Navigation Company, which later became the Jacksonville, Tampa and W., being the beginning of the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad in a later merger, I obtained a position with the S. B. Hubbard Hardware Company as an

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office boy on June 1, 1878. I was in the employ of this firm for fifty-five years, becoming President of the company upon the death of Mr. Hubbard in 1903.

"Come over here and read this testimonial, given to me by the employees of the store when I retired in 1936,["?"] he said, lighting a table lamp so that the careful lettering could be more easily discerned.

The testimonial in a frame 18 by 24 inches, reads:

June 1, 1878. August 31, 1936.

Manager, 1884. President since June, 1903.

"We, the undersigned, wish to express our esteem for our association with you those many years, and it is with grateful appreciation for the fine spirit which you created that we pledge ourselves to continue, and wish you the best of health and many years of happiness."

(Below are pen signatures of all [employee?]).

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"God bless them! I hired every one of them, and not a college man among them. You know colleges have ruined more men than they have made great.

"Do you know how I judge people? By their eyes. They are the greatest index to a person's character. I hired those men, some of them when they were boys, now they are middle-aged men - my two sons along with the others - because they had honest eyes, and they have never failed me, nor will they fail the firm for which they work.

"I was married in Jacksonville on December 13, 1883, to Miss Jessie [Eugonia Grierson?], daughter of John Walton [Grierson?], a pharmacist who was also located in LaVilla. By the way, the boundary of LaVilla was Clay Street.

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"We had five children: John Clarence, Frank Clarence, Myra, Edith (wife of Leonard Griffith [Wallis?]) and Sam Hubbard Gray.

"Edith is the only one of my children interested in my old papers, pictures, and historical records. She came down here last year and tried to sort them over and started to list them, but she had mixed them up so I can't lay my hands on anything now.

"Did you ever see anything like this - a book written on sheepskin, with a sheepskin cover? It is a book my mother brought over from England, containing the records of a little church where her family the Sowersbys originated at Holingston, near [Hull?], England. Paper was so precious and so expensive, that only one page was allowed for a year's records - you see the birth s, marriages, and other records entered - the earliest date 1664, and still very legible. My grandfather's name, my great-grandfather's and others - they go back three or four generations.

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"Here is a little Sundayschool paper[.?] The Carrier Dove, published April 11, 1870, which my mother very carefully preserved because it contained a little poem of my mine offering my young heart and services to God.

"I have written hundreds of poems, a great many of them on the back of my business cards. Can you imagine a hardware executive getting out of bed in the middle of the night or early morning hours just to jot down a poem that came to [his?] mind? Here is a sample: 'A successful man is one who gathers a fortune he don't need To leave to people who do not deserve it.'

"Here is another of personal sentiment to my wife on the occasion of our fiftieth wedding anniversary on December 13, 1933, which I presented to her with a [?] fifty dollar gold piece, made out of gold from the State of California.

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"By the way, I have quite a collection of gold coins, both from America and European countries.

"This poem I wrote on retiring from active business in 1936: 'He put aside his work regretfully, with hands that lingered, yearning, while the thoughts Still surging through his teeming brain now throbbed for freedom. He had toiled for years - yet deemed Each piece to be a smaller part of some far greater plan that he must shape, and mold, until it reached perfection. Then he rose, to slowly mount the stairs in search of rest.

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The moonlight and the stars, with silver [sheem?], Kept watch above a fervid world, where men still dreamed of fame, or fought for place and power, As step by step he neared his room above, He grow loss weary; saw with clearer sight. His footsteps hastened and his hands, with strength renewed, were eager to respond and thus became attuned with heart and mind and soul. He walked as one to whom has been revealed, as in a vision, God's eternal ways. The consciousness of Christ brought life anew, and knowledge, too, that endless time was his in which to finish all he had begun."

"Do you like that one? It's the way I expressed my sentiments when I retired for active service at the store, which I saw grow from a modest retail hardware establishment to a wholesale house with a territory covering several adjoining states and a swarm of hustling [employees?]. But I have not retired altogether; I am still on the board of directors.

"Here is a comical poem - words and music - printed envelope size, entitled 'Creditor Query,' — the air 'Comin' Through the Rye': "If a body trust a body And fail to get prompt pay. May a body ask a body, Please remit today."

This was signed with the firm name - S. B. Hubbard Hardware Company, Jacksonville, Florida, and mailed to delinquent customers.

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"Here is a poem in Latin I composed and sent to one of our beloved rectors of St. Stephens Church." He chuckled reminiscently as he said: "I was expelled once from old Duval High School because I would not study my Latin lessons. But I went back and mastered it.

"Mind if I smoke? he [querried?], extracting a small briarwood pipe from his coat pocket. "Isn't it a beauty? Italian briar. I have never learned to smoke cigars or cigarettes. Every morning I ride down town in a taxi - I never owned an automobile, and what's more, never will - generally with three or four young lady occupants; they light up and I get out my old pipe - self defense!

"When my family located / in LaVilla, they started the Episcopal parish church, know as St. Stephens, in 1873. Rev. C. D. [Barber?] was the first rector. He buried my father who sacrificed his life in the yellow fever epidemic of 1888. Only six men attended the funeral, and every one of them died later with the fever, including Mr. Barber. I had it, but only in a light form and never even went to bed. My mother and sister also contracted it, but recovered.

"Rev. Brooke G. White then was sent to the parish, but he was not much of a preacher - more of a horse trader - used to send to Texas and get [carloads?] of broncos and sell or trade them off.

"Here is one of the old record books of St. Stephens, showing a list of fifty members in 1883. On this page is 12 Rev. White's collections for Sunday, March 31, 1889. Rev. J. H. Bicknell was superintendent of the Sundayschool. Another rector died of tuberculosis. The original church property consisted of an entire block of ground, but it has been whittled down by one means or another until it is now a small plot. The building still stands.

"I was one of the founders in 1885 of the American Trust Company, later taken over by the Atlantic National Bank. I am still on the board of directors, also for another local bank, and

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have been one of the bond trustees of Duval County since 1890, including the St. Johns River bridge - too much responsibility for one of my age[?] I'll have to pass some of it to younger shoulders. And just look at this stack of unanswered letters! Six inches high. I have three secretaries at the store, but do not like to trouble them with my personal mail.

"This house, where I have lived for fifty years, is in need of a new roof and other repairs, and the man who has attended to my property upkeep for fifteen years is sick. He might as well be dead, because he'll never get up again. Present day mechanics are unreliable — nothing but kykes and negroes - just grab what money they can and take little interest in their work. I have three houses on the farm, too, that heed going over. Things like that are beginning to worry me - afraid I'm getting old."

Still going through the bundle of old papers he brought up a faded photograph of the old Freedman's Bank building of the early 1870's. "This was on the corner 13 where the [Furchgott]? store now is," he said.

"In 1877 Mr. Barnett came from Kansas and started his bank on the opposite corner. He afterwards built a larger building at Laura and Forsyth Streets, and in 1925 erected the magnificent 16-story bank and office building running through the block [to?] Adams Street - a magnificent achievement for a magnificent business man. I met [Bion?] Barnett this morning, a splendid gentlemen. He is a little older than I am.

"One of the earliest settlers of Duval County was William Barrs, the father of all these Barrs boys in Jacksonville. He was log surveyor for the county. The logs would be rafted down the St. John River and dumped on the levee in front of the Everett Hotel. This was in the [1860's?], and nearby was Bradbury's Sawmill, which turned the logs into lumber.

"Here is a picture of the old shoemaker Bank, of which young Bryan [Taliafero?] was cashier.

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“And this is a bundle of photographs taken after the big fire in 1901. I was living right here with my family, but we were out of the fire zone, and that night our back yard was filled with refugees.

“Pictures and photographs are a hobby with me. This bundle consists of camera shots taken in Havana, Cuba, four months after the conclusion of the Spanish-American war. This one is the outside of Moror Castle, and this from the inside. Here is one of the Maine - wrecked in 14 the harbor. This is one of J. [?.] T. Bowden, and young [Sturdivant?], who were with me on the trip, taken in the cemetery adjoining the castle. A high wall enclosed this forbidden space, but I scaled it first and pulled the others after me. The skeletons are the poor relics whose relatives did not pay the rent on their graves in the cemetery. The bones were dug up and pitched in here and the graves re-sold to other purchasers.

“By the way, I have a real skeleton in my closet,” he laughed. “Sure enough! One day in the early 1880's I was at Pablo Beach and back in the woods saw a rather large mound with a big hickory tree growing in the center. It looked rather interesting, so I dug into it, and after hard work, brought up three [skeletonssintact?], with a quantity of wampum, beads and other Indian paraphernalia. The mound was between [Bablo?] and Diego, or what is now know as Palm Valley. I gave two of the skeletons and the three heads to some doctors here in Jacksonville, but one skeleton I kept myself.

“I have collected other things, too — butterflies, birds' eggs and snakes. One time the [Smithsonian?] Institution sent me a barrel of alcohol and I put the snakes in alive and shipped them.

“But of all my activities, I like farming best. I have been a farmer all my life, and I like to hunt and fish. You must see my garden, too, before you leave.”

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We passed from the library through a side room off [h?] the kitchen to the back porch extending across the entire southern part of the house. "Here's where I really live," said Mr. Gray. We went down the steps into the garden covering a half block to the south of the house.

"My favorites are zinnias. This is a new variety called the 'Will Rogers.' These are from Mexico, and this bed of deep red is of an African variety. There are yellow daisies, African daisies, cherries from Jerusalem, gold and silver sunflowers, orange tomatoes - yellow ones, the size of oranges - Bermuda onions, this bed of duplicators here are onions from the Island of Teneriffe. Running up this tree is a [chiota?] vine - a kind of Central American squash. Over in this corner is a bed of Four o'clocks from Alaska, white flowers six inches long with deep crimson centers. There by the house is an Irish potato which will put out runners fifty feet long covering the lattice work at the end of the porch, with small potatoes hanging from [atoms?] in the air. This is a yellow Cape [Jasamine?], and here are shrimp growing on a tree," he laughed as he pointed to a small bush three feet high, literally covered with a light colored pink shrimp-shaped flower from Africa.

"In the back there is my vegetable garden - special varieties of corn, cucumbers, lettuce, beans, garlic - a new species which produces small cloves on long stems in the air.

"Work? I love it. I have worked hard all my life. I have been through many discouraging situations and in tight places, but I always came through with flying colors, because I worked hard."